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JUAN RODRIGUEZ'S ROCK 'N' ROLL LIFE: PART 5 OF 7

A close call when pigs fly

REVIEWING PINK FLOYD'S Olympic Stadium show in 1977 required special measures — and almost led to an early grave

Longtime Gazette contributor Juan Rodriguez has enjoyed a vantage point on rock 'n' roll that few listeners – or even critics – have experienced. Before the music industry became a well-oiled machine, he found himself with enviable access to some of the biggest names to pass through Montreal, as well as some of the city's brightest stars. In this weekly series, he looks back at the moments that stand out in his career.

JUAN RODRIGUEZ
MUSIC

The nervy high-wire routine of reviewing on a tight deadline was a challenge that buzzed me when I moved to The Gazette in 1975, following years of sending my stuff from home to the Star — an afternoon publication — by taxi at 5 a.m. after a night of partying. Not only did I have to make an early exit from shows that rarely started on time, or had desperately long intermissions, but also factor in a precious 10 minutes to down a couple of doubles at the Mother Martin's bar next door while trying to decipher my notes, before racing upstairs to the hot seat at The Gazette's newly installed computers to hammer out some stream of consciousness in 20 minutes, praying that the system wouldn't crash (something that occurred with alarming regularity). If it did, I dashed downstairs to scribble out a few complete sentences by hand over another drink, the show's din still ringing in my head.

Musicians always made it interesting, even if I disliked their music. I was like a moth to their flame, whether I admitted it or not.

Phil Collins took 15 minutes out from a midnight gold-record bash — at which I murmured audible blasphemies during the solemn presentation — to drink, share a joint, and ask me exactly what I didn't like about Genesis. "Aw, c'mon Phil, you know as well as I do that it's just a bunch of overblown shtick!" He smiled (knowingly?). After a hatchet job on the Strawbs (remember them?), I was invited to chat with leader Dave Cousins — who startled me by saying he agreed with my review and wanted some advice!

Burton Cummings offered his own advice. The Guess Who never had my blessings, but a promo tour in 1975 brought us face to face. The group was on its last legs, and I wore a brand new Guess Who T-shirt for the occasion. (I had no clean change of laundry, I swear.) Politesse reigned during the Q&A. But at 5 a.m., my phone rang. "If I woke you up, I'm glad!" It was Burton on a bender, seething over my review of the 1974 album Road Food, which I trashed song by song for Creem. "Do you know the harm that review did us?" he blathered wildly. "Why don't you go back where you came from, you wetback!"

The interview got good space, with no mention of the unfortunate call. His PR rep phoned, apologizing profusely. "It's nothing personal," I replied. It never is: Some of the nicest people make the worst music, and vice versa. Long after I had massacred Dan Hill's weepy Sometimes When We Touch ("the honesty's too much"), we shared a pleasant lunch together where he poured out his soul.

A Beach Boys concert at the Forum in 1976 featured the return of wayward genius Brian Wilson, who cracked up on drugs in the '60s and was now supposedly fit to perform. He wandered out of the dressing room, candy-cane shirt neatly starched, his vacant eyes staring in an effort to locate his position. Possessed by panic, he took matters in hand by walking out a door — leading to a hallway where fans were guzzling the remains of their beer. He quickly returned, sabre-faced, asking no one in particular, like a child: "Where's the show?"

Pink Floyd's concert at the Big O in 1977 was hyped as the largest ever held in Montreal: 80,000 fans flocked to witness the Animals Tour, with its giant pig floating overhead in the venue. The Gazette went gangbusters on coverage, dispatching me to Philadelphia to check them out the previous week, and sending me to stake out the Bonaventure Hotel for Floyd sightings the day before the show. (Luckily, I nabbed Nick Mason in the coffee shop.) This Olympian gig meant filing a story by phone at 9:30 p.m. for the early edition and, two hours later, filing end-of-concert adds and whatever else I had left.

While the Floyd performed the opening half, I commandeered a pay phone in a hall with a hideous echo. Motoring on some speedy yet sharp-focus Hawaiian weed that just arrrived in town that week, I started shouting out sentences from notes: "This was the ultimate electronic medicine show ... Luminous obscurity is what Pink Floyd is all about, and they were probably a little more obscure than usual last night," I barked through the din.

Cupping one ear, my voice rising to be heard over the noise, I hadn't noticed a crowd of fans gathered to hear what the critic had to say. When I finally looked up, I was horrified at being booed by bleary-eyed, mesianic Floyd fans on magic mushrooms, speed, pot and beer, sweat pouring off their faces as they gave me the evil eye while I blurted that David Gilmour's guitar solos "were formless, mere time fillers leading up to the light and sound effects."

As I glanced at the increasingly unsavory crowd, paranoia striking deep, I imagined myself as the subject of a Page One story: Rock Critic Ripped Apart by Pink Floyd Fans at Big O. (Among them was a saucer-eyed Claude Charron, PQ minister for youth and sports, staring at me, bemused.) For the second filing, I sought out a phone farther away, nearer an exit.

In 1975 I programmed a CBC radio show, That Midnight Jazz (hosted by my friend Michael Whalen), that sought to redefine jazz by playing, say, Stevie Wonder and Zappa alongside Charlie Parker.

I spent a day interviewing Keith Jarrett, the so-called enfant terrible jazz star of the day. Notoriously picky over sound systems, pianos and, above all, audience coughing, he sparked wonder (and idolatry) with ecstatic solo piano rambles. We wound up having cognac at the Hôtel du Parc. "Biggest beds in the city," he announced, as if he'd personally inspected all of them.

I eagerly wrote the longest newspaper story he had yet received. He had a load of opinions; a partisan of finding electricity in acoustic music, he said something mildly derogatory about Miles Davis's electric band, in which he had briefly served. Six months later, he hit town for a club gig with his splendid quartet (Charlie Haden, Paul Motian, Dewey Redman). Opening night happened to be my birthday, and a handful of friends helped me celebrate. Between sets, I felt a tap on my shoulder: it was Jarrett, fuming. "I never said those things about Miles!" True, I didn't use a tape recorder, and I might've missed a nuance — stuff happens, Keith. Nevertheless, a Jarrett concert is always special, one of a kind.

The last time I saw him, three years ago, he cut his encore short and gave a harangue because audience members were taking pictures with their cells — something the PA announcer had warned was verboten.

One of the most poignantly sad interviews was with the great lyrical pianist Bill Evans in 1980. The sun shone in his hotel room in the early afternoon as he sat down for breakfast. But his hands were trembling and his face was covered by a sheen of sweat. Evans was a heroin addict who also dipped into coke.

In 1974 I picked up the phone and Robbie Robertson was on the other end. He wanted to do an interview to generate publicity for a documentary on the Band's Ontario roots; he was looking for government funding. Living with his wife, Dominique, in the Côte-des-Neiges area (where I grew up), he met me on a snowy afternoon at a bistro where I used to meet my very first girlfriend.

Robertson is a very deliberate talker, measuring every word for just the right meaning and nuance. He speaks to you as if you were his confidant. The interview went like a charm, but he had one condition: He wanted to read his quotes before publication, "just in case I've left anything out." This contravened all rules of professional journalism, which prevent the reporter from being manipulated as a mouthpiece for the interviewee. But I happily accepted his condition (I was on this musician's side) — the first time I allowed a subject pre-approval. (As for my own words, not a chance!)

When my transcribing was finished, Robertson invited me to his apartment so he could check it out. The one-way conversation went like this: "Well, maybe I meant something like this. ... You don't mind if I change this quote? ... We should elaborate on this," and so on. The process was a fascinating glimpse into the mind of Robertson; a benign control freak. The published piece was titled Thinking Out Loud, from a Band song title.

The upshot was that the government refused the grant application, so Robertson went to Plan B, with Martin Scorsese filming The Last Waltz at San Francisco's Winterland theatre in 1976; the Band's guests included Muddy Waters, Joni Mitchell, Neil Young, Bob Dylan and many more. Robertson invited me, and his greeting from the stage at rehearsal was, "Well, looks like everything's in the pocket." (Indeed, the stage floor was littered with plastic dance-step footprints, indicating the musicians' locations for Scorsese's cameras.) A backstage area included a White Room, where invitees could snort coke in privacy. In fact, I've never seen so many wasted-looking musicians; I took the hotel elevator with Eric Clapton, who, eyes half-lidded, leaned up against the wall as if his life depended on it.

I watched the show from the rafters with Michael J. Pollard (from Bonnie and Clyde). The next morning, a Friday, energized by the show (and a stash I scored), I dictated the story for a Saturday Entertainment front-pager three time zones away. On such a tight deadline, I felt like a "real" reporter, not just a rock critic.

One of the best interviews was with Paul Anka, revolving around the sheer survival of rock 'n' roll. At 16, Anka scored with Diana, selling 20 million worldwide. He played the Forum in 1957, on a bill with Fats Domino, Buddy Holly, Frankie Lymon and the Bobbettes. The NFB documentary Lonely Boy — on Anka becoming the youngest person to play the famed Copacabana in New York in 1960 — was required viewing for a knowledge of the industry's early years. Anka had composed the Tonight Show theme, wrote the lyrics for Sinatra's signature hit My Way (adapted from the French song Comme d'habitude), was the voice of Kodak commercials and now, in 1979, was known mainly for the controversial pro-life anthem (You're) Having My Baby.

Promoting an upcoming week at Place des Arts, he invited me to his opening of the Boardwalk Regency hotel in Atlantic City. Flowers, fruit, a bottle of wine and an IBM Selectric awaited me. Five minutes before the end of his first set, I was whisked up a private elevator to his suite. Ten minutes later, showered, scented, dressed in a beige leisure suit, he sat down and spoke with the confidence born of his early experience as a teen prodigy.

"Because I was the youngest, I guess I was taken advantage of the most. So I became very determined to protect myself. I didn't come from a wealthy family — I was just a little kid star from Ottawa. None of us made any money on those all-star rock 'n' roll road shows, and none of us were prepared for the sudden stardom. I saw how others got screwed financially and what this thing with fame did to their lives. I learned early that you need to have respect for business and your craft."

Having made the transition from rock 'n' roller to crooner, he admitted to an identity crisis when the Beatles arrived: "I guess that was the time of life when I was most unsure of myself. This was a new kind of music, the new wave that turned the industry inside out. I didn't know where I could fit in. I could still perform, but I was living on my past."

He said Elvis's version of My Way gave it new meaning: "It was kinda like his eulogy." The mortality rate in this business was an issue, "Andy Warhol said it: You're famous for 15 minutes. After that, what do you do? It's not only a question of handling success; it's also coping with failure. Success is like an axe over your head — it's a quick in and out. But what do you do for encores? It got to Presley. He didn't know how to cope with changes in the business."

The obvious pitfalls were drugs, booze: "I'm a product ive person, so I'm fascinated by things that will help stimulate creativity. I'm a great fan of Aldous Huxley, who really experimented seriously with drugs. But I saw what excess did to Frankie Lymon, who got hooked young."

Anka spoke about (You're) Having My Baby being seen as anti-feminist, anti-abortion. "When the song came out (in 1974), there was a lot of confusion, with Vietnam and the drug crisis. The controversy has died down. I think people now see the song as it is — it really gives the choice to the woman. "You didn't have to do it," the song says. I think what got people angry was the song went to No. 1."

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Pink Floyd drew 80,000 fans to the Olympic Stadium in 1977, some of whom gave Juan Rodriguez a fright at deadline.

Guess who's calling at 5 a.m.? Burton Cummings shared a piece of his mind.

Robbie Robertson put Rodriguez on his dance card at The Last Waltz.

When it comes to sustaining a career, Paul Anka did it his way.

Next in this series

Look for these instalments in the Culture section:

Feb. 23: At home chez nous; Neil Young soundtracks the critic's fade into the black.

March 2: A good cause doesn't always make for good songs; back on the wagon with the Grateful Dead; Kent Nagano provides an entry to the classical world; a return to Montreal, and to a love of popular music.

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